

A Beach Person Comes to Terms With the Bay

BY SUSAN SWARD

I WAS A CHILD of the ocean. When I was growing up in Southern California, the ocean grasped my soul. When I moved to San Francisco, a city surrounded by water on three sides, it wasn't the same.

I had always loved the ocean the way I suspect some people love the rituals of religion. For me, the ocean was always there. I savored its wildness, tides, storms, taste and shifting moods. I had faith in it.

Up north, now in my 30s, I found a different world.

Even in the summer, the water temperature in San Francisco Bay hovered in the low 60s, making it off limits as far as I was concerned. And it wasn't the same, anyhow: I kept referring to all the water indiscriminately as "ocean." "It's a bay," the natives would correct me.

I found the bay somewhat unreal, like a postcard. Although I could see it from many parts of the city, it had a storybook quality to it, like some museum painting meant to be admired but never touched. And indeed, I rarely touched this water. I was older now. I was of the city.

In an odd way, too, I felt that although the city was located on the water, it didn't relate to the water the same way that Southern California coastal towns did. In this setting, I saw no way to rekindle the kind of intimate love I held for the Pacific Ocean in Southern California when I was a child.

Back then, everything about the ocean had a brilliant vividness to it.

The sun's glittering reflection. The hot sand between my toes. The bubbling white froth of the waves breaking on the shore. The lifeguards driving up and down the beach in their jeeps, using a megaphone to warn people about riptides. The wall-to-wall teenage bodies huddled around blaring radios. The families with their picnic baskets, lemonade coolers and multi-colored beach umbrellas. And at night, the moon's white path across the black water and the yellow and white neon lights shimmering on the shoreline.

During those summers in Santa Monica, I went to the beach almost every weekend with my parents. Mother packed us sandwiches and cookies wrapped in wax paper. I built sand castles and ran in and out of the surf with my sisters. Sometimes our Shetland sheep dog, Robby, jumped into the water with us.

When I was older, Father taught



us how to body surf. Just at the right moment I would kick into a wave and then let the water boil around me, pushing me toward the shore.

And when I was older still, my idea of a perfect date was a drive up the coast north of Malibu with my boyfriend. On warm summer nights, we parked the car at the base of a glistening white sand dune south of Ventura. Then we climbed up to where the dune met a rocky cliff, and we sat watching the moon.

When I first moved to San Francisco, the ocean seemed a pale thing by comparison — distant, almost inert.

Perhaps it was to perpetuate those warm ocean days of the past that I bought tropical-looking plants and placed them around the house in such profusion that my husband complained. I wore Hawaiian print blouses and purchased a pair of yellow shoes with green palm trees on them. At parties, I played reggae music and served rum drinks. I owned as much of the ocean as I could find in the shops of downtown San Francisco.

Almost every morning, meanwhile, I swam in one of San Francisco's indoor public pools, which are wondrous places open regularly to hordes of happy swimmers. But in the past year the crowds started bothering me. I found myself weary of the jabs, the kicks and the bumper-to-bumper pool traffic.

So finally, I decided to attempt what had previously been unthinkable — accept the ocean as it is in Northern California. By "ocean" I meant bay, of course.

With a friend, I ventured early one morning down to Aquatic Park. We

stripped off the clothes we were wearing over our bathing suits and dove into the water. Everything I had thought before about bay swimming — it was all true. The water was freezing in a limb-numbing sort of way. My head ached slightly, as if I had eaten ice cream too rapidly.

But we kept going other mornings. Many times it was foggy or windy or both. But after a painfully cold first minute or two, a comforting numbness consumed me. The salt water tasted good on my lips. And I liked the resistance I felt from the current as I swam up and down along the beach for 20 minutes. There were no lanes, no chlorine, no other swimmers to maneuver around.

WITHIN DAYS, my friend and I joined the Dolphin Club so we could shower moments after we left the water. Days that we didn't swim we agreed we didn't feel so alive.

At the beach, there is no such thing as bad weather. Even on rainy days, a huge ocean liner will sometimes sail by at sunrise — a looming presence in "our pool." Pelicans and seagulls glide and swoop past. And on days so foggy that I can't see Alcatraz or the Golden Gate Bridge, I listen to the haunting call of the foghorns or watch the seagulls dip in and out of the mist. On sunny mornings, sailors hoist anchor at Aquatic Park and set off into the bay all alone, fellow adventurers on the water.

Day after day, I see Fisherman's Wharf early in the morning when trucks are loading and unloading — before the tourists arrive to nibble crab or lobster, browse through the

T-shirt shops or buy trinkets sold by the sidewalk merchants.

Sometimes as I am swimming I look up at the city crowding over the hills behind the big white Ghirardelli sign. The city becomes a friend, a presence. I see it now with a familiar affection. It's no longer the city that sometimes seems too much in love with itself, too disdainful of other cities.

As I swim, I get something else from the ocean, too. As an agnostic slouching toward atheism, I conclude that the ocean, along with some unspoiled stretches of land nearby, like the Marin Headlands, offers the closest thing I may ever find to a religion and a sense of peace.

In the bay — the "ocean" of my adulthood — I reclaim some of that childhood trust in something bigger than all the turmoil that the day-to-day world can send my way. The wildness of the water overwhelms that highly structured person I am, the professional, the reporter.

At work at the newspaper, stories come and go — budgets, disasters, murders, zoning decisions, scandals. But day in, day out, the ocean waits. The tide comes in; the tide goes out.

Along with the peace I find before the rush of the working day, my ocean mornings give me a sense of living more fully in the present. For I wouldn't want to become one of those dusty older ladies who can tell you vividly about her youth but has very little to say about all the years that followed.

My ocean memories are stored in me, and now, too, I have the bay.

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